

Exclusive
early look at
**AS THE
CROW FLIES**
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**CRAIG
JOHNSON
DIVORCE HORSE**

A WALT LONGMIRE STORY



Also by Craig Johnson

The Cold Dish

Death Without Company

Kindness Goes Unpunished

Another Man's Moccasins

The Dark Horse

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Forthcoming from Viking:

As the Crow Flies

CRAIG JOHNSON

DIVORCE
HORSE

VIKING

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For Judy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After my editor at Viking asked me to consider doing a short story to debut the publication of *As the Crow Flies*, the eighth book in the Walt Longmire series, I thought it might be a nice opportunity for a connecting tissue between novels.

When I was starting out and was concerned about the artistic integrity of writing a series, Tony Hillerman gave me a piece of advice: find a framework for the books, something that would connect them but also differentiate them. I'm a Westerner, and the thing I immediately thought of that divides my life and that has an effect on me on a day-to-day basis are the seasons. Fully aware that June on the high plains is nothing like January, I pulled what I refer to as "a Vivaldi"—dividing the novels into four seasons. This provided me a framework, one that allowed me only a few months between books, which resulted in a continuity in the series that readers seem to enjoy—but that's not saying that this process is seamless.

I decided to cover the seams by producing a short story that might provide a transition between novels, hence *Divorce Horse*.

I'd like to thank the Real Bird family, instrumental in the Sheridan World Champion Indian Relay Races; the Sheridan-WYO-Rodeo Board of Directors; my good buddy Marcus Red Thunder; and Michael Crutchley, for the reminder of what rural sheriffs really do. And to Mike and Susie Terry, who coined the phrase Divorce Horse.

Divorce Horse

It was Memorial Day weekend, and I was having dinner with my best friend, Henry Standing Bear, and my daughter Cady at the Busy Bee Café. Still convalescing from my experiences chasing after escaped convicts in the Bighorn Mountains, I fingered the oversize ring on my thumb and watched the turquoise wolves chase the coral ones on the silver band; then I plucked it off and stuffed it in my shirt pocket under my badge.

I'd been sheriffing solo since my deputy, Victoria Moretti, had flown back to Philadelphia for the long weekend to help with the upcoming wedding arrangements on that end. Cady was marrying Vic's brother Michael at the end of July, and Vic was consulting with her mother Lena about the nuptials. It was complicated. Boy howdy.

Generally, Cady and Vic just shared a cup of coffee in the Denver airport as they traded time zones during their assorted holiday layovers, but on this stint they'd had a little more time to talk, since Cady had driven Vic to the airport in Billings. They'd engaged in what I'd feared—a wide-ranging conversation.

“Vic looks really good.”

I continued to sip my iced tea and joined Henry in studying the fast-flowing water of Clear Creek riffling by the café in a torrent of melt from the Bighorns. “Yep.”

The Greatest Legal Mind of Our Time leaned in with a few strands of strawberry blond hair slipping in front of her face, reminding me so much of her mother. “She bought a house?”

“Yep.”

“So she's sticking around.”

I turned my head, aware that Henry wasn't the only one occupied with fishing, and studied my daughter. “I didn't know that she had been talking about going anywhere.”

She brushed away my remark with a fan of her fingers. “I just wasn't sure if she'd stick.”

I concentrated on the creek and considered the statement. It was true; the high plains were a place of transition—people came, people went, a few stayed. Economics had a lot to do with it, but so did the loneliness of the topography. It was as if the land had hollowed out spaces in people until they treated each other with that same distance. Some never came to a truce with that within themselves, but some did. Vic had threatened to run off with the Feds and a number of other agencies, and had even thought about Philadelphia again, but those threats seemed

to come less and less often. "I think she likes it here."

"I think she likes parts of it." Cady took a sip of her diet soda in her continuing effort to be a size 2 by the July wedding. "How old is she again?"

Reaching for my glass, I almost tipped it over but caught it in the last instant. "We've . . . never discussed that."

She nudged the Cheyenne Nation with her shoulder. "How old is she, Bear?"

He shrugged. "I have found in most relationships with women it is best to remember their birthdays but forget their age."

"Look who I'm asking." She rolled her eyes and redirected them, looking into the golden light reflecting off the buildings on the east side of Main Street. The stores were staying open just a little longer than their usual five p.m. in the hopes of plying the tourist trade that the American Indian Days Parade and Pow-Wow had engendered. Most of the crowd had adjourned to the county fairgrounds, but the barely beating heart of commerce sprang eternal.

I glanced at Henry, who continued watching the water.

She leveled her cool, gray eyes on my face. "So, what's going on with you two?"

Tipping my hat back, I turned to give her a stare. "That would be in the none-of-your-business file."

She slid down in her chair and twisted the hair that had escaped her ponytail around her index finger. "How come I can't ask you about your personal life, but you can ask me about mine?"

The Cheyenne Nation grunted but said nothing so as not to add to the table's verbal minefield.

I nudged my glass and glanced around to make sure that no one else was within ear reach, but the only other patrons on the remarkably clear, warm, and velvety early evening were a threesome of cowboys at a table by the front door, and Dorothy, the owner and proprietor, who was busily putting our dinners together. "I have never asked you about your personal life, ever."

She thought about it and then grinned. "I kind of volunteer it, don't I?"

Henry smiled. I didn't say anything.

"Sometimes too much?" She fingered her napkin, and I noticed that her nails were blush pink and not their usual dark red. She must be practicing bridal etiquette.

I listened to the radio playing behind the counter; Hank Williams crooning "You're Gonna Change (Or I'm Gonna Leave)." I thought maybe I should soften my response. "It's normal—women ask about relationships but men hardly ever do."

She slipped on the smile she always did when she didn't particularly believe what I was saying—I had gotten that smile since she was six. "Never?"

I glanced at the Bear and watched as he turned to Cady, his voice rumbling in his chest. "Hardly ever."

"I don't believe that."

I shrugged and sipped my tea as Dorothy arrived with two deluxe chicken-fried-steak sandwiches piled high with fries, and another plate with a small mound of cottage cheese and a slice of tomato. I asked, purely for form's sake. "The usual?"

She placed the plates in front of us and raised an eyebrow. "Which one?"

I pointed at the marginal board of fare on Cady's plate. "Not that."

Dorothy smirked. "I've named that Chef's Choice." She put a bottle of no-fat, low-calorie balsamic vinaigrette in front of Cady and glanced around. "How are the sheriff's department, Indian scout, and learned counsel tonight?"

"Hopefully slow." I checked my pocket watch. "Especially since—with the exception of Ruby and Saizarbitoria down at the fairgrounds—I gave the rest of the staff the night off." I returned the watch to my pocket and unrolled my napkin, depositing the flatware by my plate, not because I needed it but because I thought I'd better put the napkin on my lap. "And Ruby's off in three minutes."

Dorothy's attention was drawn back to Cady, who had reached for the salad dressing. "How are you, sweet pea?"

"I'm good." She rearranged the tomato. "Business finally slowing down?"

Dorothy sat on a stool adjacent to the counter and rubbed her ankle. "Yeah, finally. It was crazy all day, especially during the parade. This is the first chance I've had to sit down. I think everybody's out at the pow-wow now." She reached over and tugged on the Bear's hair, and I tried to remember if I'd ever seen anybody do that except her. "Damned Indians. I suppose people would just as soon eat fry-bread and cotton candy." She glanced at me and then back to Cady. "Your father lure you away from that young man of yours?"

"Just till I'm sure he's feeling better after his mountain adventure." My daughter's eyes held on me for a moment, and I could see the worry there. "And besides, I figured I'd stick around a little while and see if I could get some preliminary wedding work done. You know I want you to make the cake, right?"

"I'm planning on it and consulting with Vic's uncle Alphonse next week about the recipe." She let go of her ankle and stood up. "You're getting married up on the Rez, right?"

"Yeah, Crazy Head Springs."

I felt a private little sorrow overtake me at that thought but continued eating.

"That's a pretty spot. Have you gotten permission?"

Cady nudged the Bear's shoulder. "I've got an *in*."

Dorothy laughed and kissed the top of Cady's head. "Congratulations, honey." Cady glowed. "Thanks."

The owner/operator glanced at the three cowboys, whom I recognized as the wranglers from Paradise Guest Ranch, and one raised his coffee mug as the other two smiled at us. "I better go refill the Wild Bunch over there." She placed her fists on her hips. "You folks need anything else?"

Cady volunteered. "I might switch over to coffee, when you get the chance."

Dorothy winked and disappeared.

Cady began nibbling at a forkful of cottage cheese but stopped just long enough to give the Bear and me a warning look. "Don't say it." She caught another curd on the end of her fork and then used it like a baton to get my attention. "I still don't believe that women ask more about personal issues than men. I mean, maybe men hide the question more, but it's there."

Henry said nothing, so I spoke for the two of us. "Okay."

She ate the bit of food but continued to watch us. "But the two of you do."

From all my years in law enforcement I knew that the only thing that happened more than not getting to eat was having your meals interrupted and abandoned. Making good progress on my sandwich, I looked at Henry, and we both turned and answered her in unison. "Yep."

Buck Owens swung into "Before You Go," and Cady sang along in her fine voice in a pretty good imitation; I was starting to think we had a soundtrack on our hands. She suddenly stopped, looked at the two of us, and I knew we were in trouble. "How about a bet, a sporting wager." She continued before I could say no. "For every woman that asks either one of us about our relationships or every man that doesn't, you two get a point. For every woman that doesn't ask us about our relationships or every man that does, I get a point."

Knowing my daughter's level of competition in all things, I knew this was a bad idea, and said so.

"Come on, Daddy. It'll be fun."

Henry leaned over and gave her the horse-eye, up close and personal. "One to nothing then."

She glanced at Dorothy, pouring her a cup of coffee behind the counter, and then back to the Bear. "We hadn't started yet."

I was shaking my head when the walkie-talkie on my hip chattered to life.

Static. "Unit one, this is base."

I slumped in my seat, dropped my sandwich in dramatic fashion, and sat there for a moment.

Static. "Walt?"

Cady, who could never resist pushing buttons, plucked the device from my duty belt and keyed the mic. "Yo."

Static. "Cady?"

I took the radio from her. "It's after five; go home."

Static. "Tommy Jefferson says one of his horses has been stolen out at the rodeo grounds."

I gazed at my half-eaten meal and sighed. "Not the divorce horse again?"

Static. "Of course."

* * *

The much-storied case of the divorce horse was the kind of tale familiar to most rural sheriffs, involving the kind of disputes you got involved in even though it

really had nothing much to do with law enforcement. The world-class Indian relay racer Tommy Jefferson and his ex-wife Lisa Andrews were Cady's age. Tommy was a New Grass from Crow Agency, Montana, who had lived with an aunt in Durant so that he could go to the high school here, and Lisa was a blond whirlwind of a barrel racer. Their romance had been epic; seven years later, their divorce was a long and familiar story. Tommy had had a bad habit of loitering at equine sales and was already a frustrated horse trader before their marriage, but it only got worse as he and Lisa joined incomes—and as he intensified his use of diet pills in an attempt to keep his racing weight down and his energy level up. It had gotten so bad that Lisa began to think that Tommy was more addicted to horses and amphetamines than to her.

When he brought home a vicious, Roman-nosed, cloudy-eyed little sorrel the color of store-bought whiskey that had a propensity to wander and bite and that took all his time, effort, and attention, Lisa had had enough, and their separation and divorce had become a pitched battle. The train wreck that had become Tommy and Lisa's lives was played out in every under-the-breath conversation in the county and on the Rez.

My part in the saga had started when Tommy, who had returned to the Rez and to methamphetamines big time, decided to call the sheriff's office in order to get Lisa to answer his calls. It had seemed logical to his chemically addled, emotionally distressed mind that it was my duty to ask Lisa to answer her phone. As a rural sheriff, there are times when the law enforcement side of the job has nothing to do with the right-thing-to-do side of the job.

So, I'd dutifully made the trip down to Powder Junction where they had shared a house, only to discover Lisa, clad in a bikini bottom, a T-shirt, and a potato-chip cowboy hat, sunbathing in her yard. I asked her if she would please answer the phone, because Tommy had been trying to get in touch with her for days.

She'd taken a sip from a can of beer beside her towel and said, "Had it disconnected."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"He was calling here twenty times a day and I couldn't take it anymore." She adjusted the straw hat and sighed. "You know he's still using, right?"

"Um, it's becoming apparent to me." I'd stood there on the other side of the chain-link fence that separated her yard from the sidewalk. "Well, he'd like you to call him."

Lisa put the can down. "No thanks. I jumped that crazy horse, Sheriff—and I have no intentions of getting back on." She applied more suntan lotion to her arms. "Anyway, I yanked the cord out of the wall."

Then she'd served papers, and that's when things really got weird.

Tommy began calling me and Verne Selby, who had been appointed judge in the case, and the county clerk about all kinds of strange things, insinuating that this was obviously a matter of racial discrimination and that anti-Indian bias had

led to the current impasse between him and Lisa. I stopped taking his calls, so he resorted to the fax machine. I would come in mornings to find thirty- and forty-page letters from Tommy, most of them incoherent but each one ending with the request that the communication be dated, stamped, and placed in the official record. Of all the faxed letters, the one that leaps to mind as the strangest was a four-pager instructing the clerk, judge, and me on what it was we should bring to Thanksgiving dinner up on the Rez—how I should bring pie, but not rhubarb since his aunt Carol usually had that covered. Like we were all family.

A standard divorce with a file over fourteen inches thick.

Vic had measured.

“Divorce Horse.”

Vic had coined the term.

* * *

I keyed the mic again. “Well then nobody stole it; nobody in their right mind would steal that horse.” I looked at the food on my plate and questioned the choice of giving the majority of my deputies the night off. “Isn’t Saizarbitoria out there?”

Static. “He’s not answering, but that could just be because of the crowd noise.”

“I’m on my way.”

Static. “Roger that.”

I keyed the mic one last time. “Go home.”

Cady worked a little faster on her cottage cheese. “My Tommy Jefferson?”

Cady and Tommy had dated and even went to a junior prom together, but this was nothing unique—my daughter had cut a wide swath in the male populace of Durant High School and had pretty much held sway with anything in a pair of Wranglers. “Yep.”

Henry chewed quickly. “Wow, a case.”

I nodded and, thinking about all those phone calls, faxes, and accusations, reached up to rub the top of my ear, which was the locale of persistent frostbite.

Cady swiped at my hand. “Stop that.” She studied me. “You don’t seem overly enthusiastic.”

The assorted injuries I’d sustained on the mountain continued to release a collective groan. “I’m not.”

Dorothy arrived with Cady’s cup of coffee, and I noticed it had been repoured into a to-go cup. “You know she’s back in town, right?”

I glanced up at the chief cook and bottle washer and fount of all things social. “Who?”

“Lisa Andrews. She was in here yesterday and said she’d rented one of those apartments over by Clear Creek.”

I thought about it. “Well, I’m pretty sure it’s over between her and Tommy.”

Dorothy shrugged and headed back to the counter as Cady wiggled in her chair like she had when she was a kid. “How ’bout I be the lead investigator on this one?”

I stared at her. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope.” She ate the last bite of cottage cheese and swallowed, her eyes glittering with anticipation. “How hard can it be?”

* * *

The weekend had been blessed with three memorable spring evenings where you could smell the grass in the pastureland, and the sagebrush and cottonwoods gasped back to life after holding their breath since October. The cool of the evening was just starting to creep down from the mountains, but it was still T-shirt weather, if long-sleeve T-shirt weather.

We argued as we climbed into the Bullet. *“How’s your dog* does not constitute a relationship question.”

She ruffled the beast’s ears as he laid his head on the center console and sniffed for the styrofoam containers Cady set at her feet. “It’s a relationship; it may not be your only relationship, but it’s a relationship.”

I lodged the to-go iced tea and the coffee into the holder on the dash, fired up the motor, and pulled the three-quarter ton down into gear and onto the vacant street to follow the Cheyenne Nation in Lola, his ’59 Baltic blue Thunderbird convertible. “You’re cheating already.”

“Look, the other two cowboys didn’t ask, so it’s two to one. I wouldn’t complain if I was you.” She pulled her coffee from the holder. “Hey, I didn’t throw you for a loop with all that wedding talk back there, did I?”

“Do I get a point from this conversation?”

“No.”

Heading toward the fairgrounds at the north edge of town, we had only driven a short distance before my truck radio crackled.

Static. “Boss, it’s unit two.”

Cady, always quicker on the draw, this time grabbed the mic from my dash. “Unit two, this is unit one. How’s the pow-wow?”

Static. “Hi, Cady. The natives are restless, at least one of them is.”

She keyed the mic. “Did somebody really steal the divorce horse, or was Tommy just high and forgot where he put it?”

Static. “No, he seems pretty straight to me, and the horse is missing.”

“We’re on our way.”

Static. “Roger that.”

I glanced at her. “Three to one.”

* * *

Cars and trucks were parked on the side of the road for a quarter of a mile to escape the dollar fee that Rotary collected like they were the Cosa Nostra. A thickset cowboy ambled up to my window.

“Chip.”

“Walt.” He looked past me and smiled at my daughter, who was making a display with her engagement ring. “Hey, Cady.” The smile faded as he stuck a palm out to me. “Gimme two dollars.”

“I’m on a call.”

He repeated. “Gimme two dollars.”

“It’s official.”

“Gimme two dollars.”

“The sign says a dollar.”

Chip looked at the Bear as the vintage T-Bird made a beeline for the VIP parking area by the grandstands and then back at me. “He said you’d pay.” He took the money and smiled at Cady. “Nice rock. I heard you were getting married?”

She fluttered her eyelashes at him, and it seemed to me she’d dated him at one point, too. “I am.”

“Congratulations.”

As we pulled in beside Henry, I cried foul. “That was a blatant use of a prop.”

She twirled the enormous diamond on her finger. “What, this little ol’ thing?” She opened the door and slid out. “Three–two.”

* * *

The roar of the crowd intimated that the Indian Relay Races had already begun, a single rider, three-horse free-for-all that involved the three horses, one for each leg of the relay, a rider in traditional dress of loincloth and moccasins who leapt from one mount to the other, and muggers, the name given to the unfortunate individuals who had to hold on to the half-wild horses in the exchange. This was an old native practice that made the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association look like a lady’s afternoon tea.

I stretched my legs and followed Henry as he led us through the tunnels that met with the main, lateral walkway. We took a left through the throngs toward the paddocks, down a set of steps to ground level.

Ken Thorpe, another of the Rotary mafia, was leaning against the gate but turned and looked at us as we arrived. “Hey, Walt.”

“I’m not giving you a dollar.”

He looked a little confused. “Okay.”

“Tommy Jefferson, New Grass team, had a horse stolen?”

“Yep, but he’s riding on a spare.”

We all crowded at the gate in time to see the riders making the near turn, bareback and crouched into the manes of their horses. The men were painted and

so were their mounts. One of the beauties of the sport was the pageantry—some of the riders in full warbonnets, some in shaman headdresses; the riders and their ponies resplendent in team colors, the designs reflecting the lines, spots, handprints, and lightning bolts that are recorded in the old Indian ledger drawings.

Henry pointed. "That's Tommy in the green."

Sporting the three vertical stripes of the New Grass team, Tommy was hard-charging in second coming up on the last leg of the second part of the relay. It was possible that the young man was simply pacing himself, but it didn't look like it: it looked like the ride of his life.

We watched as they cannoned by, the fine dust of the fairgrounds settling on our hats and shoulders as we all jockeyed to see the riders transfer onto the last horse in the race. It was at this exchange where the majority of wrecks occurred.

The lead rider, a lanky fellow from the Coleville Reservation in eastern Washington, always a powerhouse, vaulted from his mount as one of his muggers grabbed that horse's reins while another held the last horse steady. The Spokane Indian misjudged the distance, or maybe it was the horse making a tiny surge to see what was leaping onto its back, but the rider managed to grab hold of the mane on the Appaloosa and launched skyward before settling into a rocket trajectory past the grandstand, the poor man bouncing off the horse's rump but still hanging on.

The crowd of close to four thousand went crazy, but by that time Tommy Jefferson, New Grass team of the Crow Nation, had leapt from his own mount. His mugger attempted to hold the chestnut steady, but the horse was now circling him with Tommy holding on to the mane, one ankle draped over the horse's spine.

The mugger, not knowing what to do, did the only sensible thing and let go., The only one that knew what it was supposed to be doing was the horse, who reared and blasted down the straightaway with Tommy hanging off the side, the rest of the field fumbling with their own transfers and losing in their attempts to catch up.

"Oh, no." The Bear, of course, was the first to see the danger.

At the far end of the grandstand were the chutes for the roping and bulldogging events—massive, metal gates, reinforced with what looked like highway guardrails. Tommy was headed straight toward them.

The chestnut, in its attempt to catch up with the Appaloosa, had set a course that would give it the best advantage but would also carry it and its rider next to the metal barrier. We could see that the horse would likely make it, but Tommy, most assuredly, would not.

Pogo-hopping on one foot, the young man was scrambling to get both legs up, but with only about a hundred feet to go, it looked like he only had maybe two hops left.

He wasn't going to make it.

It was so evident that he wasn't going to make it that I reached for Cady's

hand in an attempt to distract her from what appeared to be Jefferson's imminent death. Her hand was already reaching behind her for mine, and I felt her grip as Tommy post-holed one miraculous stamp on the ground and barely slithered past the abutment, his calf grazing the steel fence.

The crowd, which I thought might've exhausted itself, went ballistic. All four thousand were standing as Tommy rounded the far corner and actually appeared to be gaining on the Coleville rider, the rest of the field a far third.

Through the back straight, I could see the warbonnet of the Spokane Indian traveling across the ground as if by magic, levitated above the infield and the far railing at close to forty miles an hour. But there was a vengeance that followed him, a Crow centaur who rounded the far corner and blew into the straight like an arrow. You could see Tommy's head tucked into the horse's mane, allowing them the most aerodynamic advantage, or maybe it was the whispering of the Indian's voice that carried them along like Crow chain-lightning.

The Spokane rider, feeling the breath on the back of his neck, turned to get a glimpse of his pursuer, and when he did, the warbonnet he wore inverted, the eagle feathers tunneling around his face like shaft-shaped blinders. His arm came up to catch it at the crucial moment when they turned the near curve, which caused the Appaloosa to go wide and miss the apex.

Tommy, taking full advantage, veered his pony to the inside, and the two were neck and neck.

From our ground-level viewpoint, it looked as if they were headed straight toward us, and as they drew to the corner it appeared as if the Colville rider had the advantage. When they rounded the curve nearest us, though, Tommy made up the distance on the inside, and they were once again running as if the two horses were in traces.

They crossed the finish line, no one able to tell which horse, the chestnut or the Appaloosa, had finished in first place. We had to take the judge's word on it.

Tommy had lost by a nose.

Henry turned to look at our little group. "It was not for lack of trying."

"No." I spoke to Ken. "How long till the next race?"

"Oh, it's a good hour. They're doing the Fancy Dance competition down here in front of the grandstand as soon as they pick up the poop and smooth the track over with the grader."

"Can we cut across to the infield and talk with Tommy?"

"If you give me a dollar." He smiled. Then he opened the gate and ushered us through.

* * *

Saizarbitoria was waiting on the other side. "Did you guys see that?"

I nodded. "I guess he had at least one life left, huh?"

He fell in step as we approached the heated conversation going on over by the

announcer's tower, the gist of which was that Tommy was going to burn the announcer's booth down with flaming arrows if the judges didn't change their opinion as to which horse had crossed the finish line first.

Tommy's demeanor was amplified by his leg, which was bleeding and streaking the chartreuse war paint he still wore. "You fuckin' Indians are trying to rob me!"

So much for Native American discrimination.

"Now, Tommy, calm down . . ."

The Colville Agency, far from home and deep in enemy territory, had wisely chosen not to attend the unofficial inquest, so the two camps in contention were Tommy and his muggers—two men almost a big as Henry and me—and the three judges, one of whom was giving extra attention to the rules since he was Tommy's uncle.

The head judge, Richard New Grass, glanced over his nephew's shoulder at me, and perhaps more important, at Henry. He nodded at the Bear and turned his attention back to the agitated rider. "It was an electronic finish, Tommy; there's nothing we can do about it. The Colville rider won fair and square, and that's all there is to it." Tipping his trademark black cowboy hat back on his head, Richard turned his patrician face toward me, effectively ignoring his nephew. "Can I help you, Sheriff?"

"I understand there's been a robbery? Something about a horse?"

Tommy danced himself between us and jerked his head in emphasis with every word. "You're damn right there's been a robbery—these sons-a-bitches are tryin' to take this race away from me."

Tommy made a dramatic display and turned on the heels of his moccasins, ignoring his uncle and walking between Henry and me toward Cady, who had been standing behind us. "And not only do these damn Indians steal the race, but one of my best horses is gone."

The muggers walked off to wipe down the sweat-marked horses. I shrugged at Richard and the rest of the judges, but they were leaving as well, most likely relieved to be rid of the New Grass entourage.

Tommy was walking with Cady, and they were both laughing—and I had the feeling I was about to lose a point.

At the outside edge of the infield, they walked past a trailer that was attached to a white Dodge half-ton painted with the green stripes of the New Grass team, next to an event tent festooned with the banners of the team's sponsors, most prominently BUCKING BUFFALO SUPPLY COMPANY, HARDIN BAIL BONDS, and H-BAR HATS. There were a number of energy drinks and sodas in a fifty-gallon cooler, and, after a few plunges into the ice, Tommy finally pulled out three power drinks, one for Cady and one each for Henry and me. "Here, supplied by one of my sponsors."

Cady handed hers back. "Do you have diet?"

Tommy sighed. "That shit's bad for you." And retrieved a bottle of water. "All I got." Then he scooped off his coyote headdress, threw himself into a lawn

chair, and looked down at his bloody calf. "Oh, man . . ." He stuck out his tongue in play exhaustion and exhaled a quick breath toward Henry. "Hey, throw me one of those horse bandages, would you?"

Henry did as requested and even wrapped the leg of the young athlete. "I am sorry you lost."

Tommy shook his head. "Just for show—we won the first heat and Colville came in seventh. We were second in this one, so all we have to do is place higher than they do by less than that in the next heat and we win it all. Lots of money riding on this one—could keep us going into next year's competition." He reached over and slapped the Cheyenne Nation's shoulder as Henry taped up the rider's bandage. "Gotta keep these Indians honest, right Bear?"

I watched as the Cheyenne Nation stood, but stooped a little and appeared to be looking closely at Tommy's face. "So they tell me."

Tommy, aware he was being inspected, grinned widely. "*Haaho*. New teeth." Henry nodded. "I thought so."

"Big Horn County Jail. The meth ate them out, so they gave me new ones." His hands stroked his arms and then brushed against each other in a demonstration of purification. "I'm clean." His head bobbed and his eyes darted to Cady. "Damn, you look good, girl. Hey, you know I'm free, right?"

Her face looked sad when she responded. "That's what I heard."

"Yeah, it was a long winter." Jefferson glanced at me, obviously embarrassed at the episodes that had included the Absaroka County Sheriff's Department and assorted Durant officials. "I still miss her, you know?"

Cady nodded and stood next to his camp chair. "Yeah."

Tommy looked up at her. "How about you, are you seeing anybody?"

I got the glance as she showed him the ring. "Yeah, I'm engaged to a guy back in Philadelphia—Dad's undersheriff's brother."

He whistled and glanced at me. "Vic?"

I nodded but Cady answered. "His name is Michael."

He folded his newly clean arms over his lean, horseman's body. "He anything like her?"

She laughed. "No." I watched her study him for a moment, and then ask: "I heard about you and Lisa. What happened?"

He ran his fingers through his hair, wet with sweat, the black of it shimmering blue in the half sun. "Oh, I don't know. I guess I got so interested in the horses that she thought I wasn't interested in her anymore." He sighed. "We both got mad and said some things . . . That's when I got started on the Black Road with the drugs and stuff. I told her I wasn't sure what it was I wanted . . ." He gestured around the dirty infield at the blowing trash. "So here I am, and I guess this is what I wanted." He swung his legs onto the dirt, pushed out of the chair, winced at the weight on his leg, and glanced at me, possibly unhappy that I was hearing all of it; then he hitched his thumbs in his loincloth. "I keep thinking that I'll just call, but I made myself a promise that I wouldn't bother her anymore after all that

happened.”

We stood there for a moment, listening to the drumming and chanting echoing off the grandstand from the Fancy Dance competition, no one looking at Tommy, Tommy looking up at the first evening star.

I straightened my hat. “So, what’s the story on the div . . . Um, on the horse?”

His face came back to life. “Oh, that horse. He’s got an adjustable lug on his left shoe, but if we’d had him in this last heat we would’ve won straight up.”

“What happened?”

He shook his head at the injustice. “We had ’em all tied to the back side of the horse trailer over here and when we went to go take ’em to the start, he was missing.”

I looked past Saizarbitoria at the two muggers, looking like embarrassed twin towers. I remembered one of their names. “Randy, you guys look for him in the infield?”

The giant answered. “Yeah, but he’s an escape artist, that one. The only one he really liked was Lisa—he’d follow her and nicker and toss his head. Only bit me.”

The other giant added. “He can untie knots like a sailor, but I had him clipped. We looked everywhere, but he’s not here.”

Tommy’s voice rose from behind me. “Somebody stole him. He’s not in the infield and there’s no way he would’ve crossed the track on his own.”

I glanced around the sizable infield—no trees, just dirt and prairie. “No way he could’ve pulled loose, jumped the railing, and joined in as the horses raced by?”

Jefferson shook his head. “The pickup riders would’ve gotten him. He was stolen, I tell ya.”

I glanced at Henry and watched as he walked between the two giants and rounded the horse trailer. Shrugging, I started after him, noticing my daughter’s hands behind her back, three fingers extended on one hand and three on the other: tied.

Ruthless.

I glanced at Saizarbitoria. “You can head back over to the grandstand, Sancho, but turn your radio up so you can hear it.”

* * *

I joined the Bear between the infield railing and the side of the trailer where the horses were tethered to a piece of rebar steel attached to the side just for that purpose. Two-year-olds, the horses were skittish, and moved away, stamping their hooves and showing us the whites of their eyes.

The Cheyenne Nation reached up and ran a hand over the nearest horse, a dark bay, nut brown with a black mane, black ear points and tail, who immediately settled with a sighing rush of air from his distended nostrils; the Bear had magic

in his hands, and besides, the animal was probably happy to meet an Indian who wasn't trying to catapult onto his back.

Henry stepped forward and then ducked under the halter leads attached to the bar. Some of the other horses backed away, and one tried to rear but was held down by the length of the rope strung through his halter. The Bear mumbled something and they settled. Magic, indeed.

At the ends of the leads were the metal snaps that could only be manipulated by an opposing thumb, and I didn't see a lot of those around on that side of the trailer.

At the other side of the horses, Henry kneeled and placed his fingertips in the impacted dirt. I felt like I always did whenever I followed his intuitive skills. The Bear was a part of everything that went on around him in a way that I could only witness. He had described scenarios to me so clearly from the remnants of events that I would have sworn that I'd been there. Crouching behind the trailer and looking at the hitching bar, he sighed. "*If they had him clipped to the end of the bar—somebody took him.*"

"Where?"

His dark eyes shifted as he stood, and he walked past the rear of the trailer to run his hand along the inside railing, finally stopping and lifting the top loose. He stared at the ground. "Here, the horse was led through here."

I joined him and looked past the dimpled, poached surface of the track at a forgotten gate leading to a fairground building that hadn't been used since the renovation of the place back in the eighties. "Across the track and through there—toward the old paddocks."

We stepped through the gate, walked across the track, and opened the top rung of a rail that you'd never have noticed unless you were looking for it. The Bear paused at the end of the walkway that stretched a good hundred yards, the darkness permeated by the rectangular light shining through the windows of the old barn in staccato. "Which do you think will get us first, the black widows or the field mice?"

The place looked its age, deserted, and as if it might collapse at any time, the peeling white paint scaling from the untreated lumber like parchment in abandoned books. "Termites would be my bet."

In the powdery dirt you could see where a horse with an adjustable screw attachment had been walked through. I kneeled this time and studied the boot prints that ran alongside the pony tracks, smallish and worn down on the heels.

"Female, or a very small man."

We were away from the road and parking lots, which would make it difficult to load an animal and whisk it away. That was the beauty of horse stealing, though—you could always ride your stolen property. Of course, that might be difficult to do with a headstrong, half-broke two-year-old that bites. "Did you see how those horses fought the muggers in front of the grandstand?"

"Yes."

“And this horse is the worst of the bunch.”
“Yes.” He smiled, having the same thought.

* * *

We got back to the infield, rounded the trailer, and found Team New Grass and my daughter where we had left them. The muggers were still attending the horses, getting them ready for the next race, while Tommy and Cady sat talking under the tent.

Tommy looked at me, and I had to admit that the Big Horn County Jail dentist had done a wonderful job on his teeth. “So, what do I do? Come into the office and fill out some paperwork?”

I pulled up short, took off my hat, and wiped the sweat from my forehead with my shirtsleeve. “Your horse is in the abandoned paddocks across the track in stall number thirty-three.”

He looked past my shoulder toward the condemned buildings. “Over there?”
“Yep.”

“How the hell did he get over there?”

“No idea.”

“How come you didn’t bring him back?”

I shook my head. “He wouldn’t let me anywhere near him, but we got him blocked off in the stall.”

He stood and glanced at the wristwatch on his arm, which looked incongruous in the middle of the war paint. “If we hurry we can get him in this next race.” He looked down at Cady and took her hand. “I gotta go, but good luck with your marriage.” He smiled with the new teeth and held her hands long enough for her to know that he meant what he said next. “There’s no way you’ll screw it up like I did.”

We watched as he walked past the muggers, who were busy currying the next team. They asked if he needed any help, but he shook his head no and lithely jumped over the railing, injured leg notwithstanding.

Randy turned and looked at me. “I’m really sorry about this, Walt. I don’t know how it is that he could’ve gotten out.”

“That’s okay. We were in the area, and it gave the two of them a chance to catch up.” Cady threw her water bottle in the trash bucket, and we made our way across the infield toward the gate where we’d come in.

Saizarbitoria was standing near the judge’s tower and joined us as we walked by. “You find the horse thief?”

“In a way.”

Cady volunteered. “The Bear and Dad found the horse over in the old paddocks.” She glanced up at Henry and then to me. “He must’ve wandered off on his own.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

The Basquo looked at me a little puzzled, and I gave him a soft punch in the chest. “I’ll tell you about it on Monday.”

I’d almost made a clean getaway when he shouted out to my daughter. “Congratulations on the engagement.”

Acting as if she was admiring her nail polish, Cady held up four fingers on one hand and three on the other as we walked across the track onto the ramp. Over the loud speaker, the announcer called all the contestants to the last heat of the World Champion Indian Relay Race.

“Did he just say ‘Indian Really Race’?” Cady caught my arm as Ken Thorpe shut the gate behind us.

“Just sounds that way with his accent.” I kept walking.

“Can we stay for the last go-round, Daddy?”

“Why?”

She made a face. “Don’t you want to see if Tommy wins?”

We watched as the other teams rode into the area in front of the grandstand, leading their remudas, but Team New Grass was suspiciously absent. Cady glanced around and then toward the infield and Tommy’s tent. “Do you think he couldn’t catch the horse?”

The Cheyenne Nation’s voice rumbled as he continued up the ramp. “Possibly.”

Cady paused, her hand remaining on the top rail. “He’ll miss the race.”

The announcer called for Team New Grass to make themselves present at the grandstand or face elimination through forfeiture. I waited a moment more at the gate and then pointed toward the team’s muggers and two horses approaching from the infield—followed by Tommy, a blonde woman, and a frisky two-year-old the color of store-bought whiskey.

I looked past the track and the infield, toward the dilapidated stalls on the far end of the fairground. “I guess he just figured out what he really wanted.” I held four fingers on one hand and four on the other against my back as I followed the Cheyenne Nation up the ramp.

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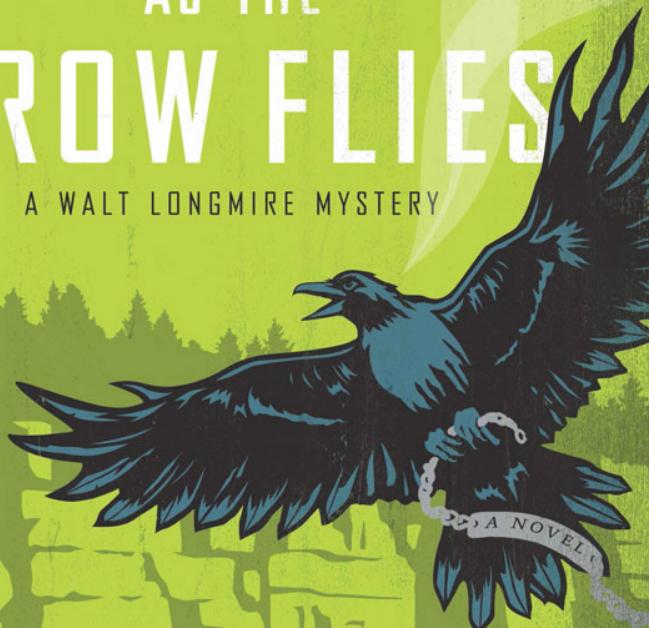


CRAIG JOHNSON

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of *HELL IS EMPTY*

AS THE CROW FLIES

A WALT LONGMIRE MYSTERY



1

“I wanna know what Katrina Walks Nice did to get kicked out of a joint like this for sixty-one days.”

I began questioning the makeup of the negotiation team I’d brought with me to convince the chief of the Northern Cheyenne tribe that he should allow my daughter to be married at Crazy Head Springs. “Don’t call the White Buffalo a joint; it’s the nerve center of the reservation.”

My undersheriff, Victoria Moretti, shook her head. “It’s a fucking convenience store.” She smiled, enjoying the muckraking. “She must’ve done something pretty shitty to get eighty-sixed out of here for two months.” Vic gestured toward the white plastic board above the cash register where all the reservation offenders who had been tagged with bad-check writing, shoplifting, and other unsavory behaviors were cataloged for everyone to see—sort of a twenty-first-century pillorying.

My eyes skimmed past the board, and I watched the crows circle above Lame Deer as the rain struck the surface of Route 212. It was the main line on the Rez, and the road that truckers used to avoid the scales on the interstate. Before 212 had been widened and properly graded, it had been known as Scalp Alley for the number of traveling unfortunates who had met their demise on the composite scoria/asphalt strip and for the roadside crosses that ran like chain lightning from the Black Hills to the Little Bighorn.

As my good friend Henry Standing Bear says, on the Rez, even the roads are red.

I was trying to pay attention, but I kept being distracted by the crows plying the thermals of the high plains sky; it was raining in the distance, but the sun appeared to be overtaking the clouds—a sharp contrast of blue and charcoal that my mother used to say was caused by the devil beating his wife.

“She must’ve stolen the cash register.”

My attention was forced back inside and under cover, and I twisted the ring on my pinkie. My wife, Martha, had given it back to me before she died so that I could give it to Cady whenever she got married.

I looked up—the negotiations weren’t going well. It would appear that Dull Knife College had suddenly scheduled a Cheyenne language immersion class at Crazy Head Springs on the day of the wedding. We had reserved the spot well in advance, but the vagaries of the tribal council were well known and now we were floundering. The old Indian across from me nodded his head in all seriousness. I

was negotiating with the chief of the Northern Cheyenne nation, and he was one tough customer.

“That librarian over at the college is mean. I don’t like to mess with her; she’s got that Indian Alzheimer’s. Um hmm, yes, it is so.”

I trailed my eyes from Lonnie Little Bird to the rain-slick surface of the asphalt—Lame Deer’s main street being washed clean of all our sins. “What’s that mean, Lonnie?”

“That’s where you forget everything but the grudges.”

I smiled in spite of myself and took a deep breath, slowly letting the air out to calm my nerves, as I continued to twirl the ring on my finger. “Cady’s really got her heart set on Crazy Head Springs, Lonnie, and it’s way too late to change the date from the end of July.”

He glanced out the window, his dark eyes following my gray ones. “Maybe you should go talk to that librarian over at the college. You’re a large man—she’ll listen to you. You could show her your gun.” He glanced down at the red and black chief’s blanket that covered his wheelchair. “She don’t pay no attention to an old, legless Indian.”

Henry Standing Bear, my daughter’s wedding planner, who had made the arrangements that were now being rapidly unraveled, sipped his coffee and quietly listened.

“But you’re the chief, Lonnie.”

“Oh, you know that don’t mean much unless somebody wants a government contract for beef or needs a ribbon cut.”

Up until this year, Lonnie’s official contribution to the tribal government had been limited to falling asleep in council. A month ago, when the previous tribal leader had been found guilty of siphoning off money to a private account belonging to his daughter, an emergency meeting had been held; since Lonnie had again fallen asleep, and therefore was unable to defend himself, he was unanimously voted in as the new chief.

“She’s in charge of all the books over there and she’s full blood—that’s pretty much the worst of both worlds.”

A heavyset man with long hair and a gray top hat with an eagle feather in it stopped by the table and rapped his knuckles on the surface. “Mornin’, Chief.”

Lonnie sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t call me that, Herbert.”

Herbert His Good Horse, the morning drive announcer on the low-power FM station KRZZ, smiled and turned to the rest of us in the crowded booth. “Do you know the story about the three Indian women who died at the same time?”

Herbert was a mainstay on the Rez, where almost everyone tuned in to 94.7 FM just to hear the outrageous jokes he told between songs.

Lonnie responded for the table. “Nope.”

“St. Peter was sitting on his throne at the gates of heaven—”

“Is this a true story, Herbert?”

He nodded his head vigorously, the eagle feather stuck in the band of his hat

bobbing up and down like a crest on his head. “It’s from one of those priests over at St. Labre, and those Catholics, they sometimes tell the truth.”

Vic barked a laugh. “Fuckin’ A.” She raised an empty coffee cup to get Brandon White Buffalo’s attention in hopes of a round of refills, but the big Crow Indian was attending to another customer.

Herbert His Good Horse produced an elongated cigar from his silk brocade vest along with a cutter. “One of the women was Lakota, one was Crow, and the other was full-blood Cheyenne. St. Peter looked at them and said that they were heathens and there wasn’t anything he could do to let them into the white man’s heaven, but that he was curious because they had all three died at the same time. He asked the first one, the Lakota woman, if she had anything to say, and she said she didn’t know anything about the rules but she had always lived her life attempting to seek a balance in the red and black roads. St. Peter listened and was impressed by the spirituality of the woman and told her she could go in after all.”

Lonnie smiled and nodded as Herbert repocketed the cutter and produced a chopped-down, brass Zippo lighter, the one that he had carried in the seventies in Vietnam. “St. Peter leaned down to the Crow woman and asked her if she had anything she wanted to say, and she told him that to her, there was a spirit in the air, the land, the water, and all the creatures that populated mother earth and that she had spent her life attempting to be respectful of all these things. St. Peter was so impressed that he waved her into the white man’s heaven, too.”

Lonnie sipped his coffee, and Henry, smiling, glanced at me.

“Then St. Peter turned on his throne and looked at the Cheyenne woman. He asked her, ‘Do you have anything you’d like to say?’ The Cheyenne woman nodded and said—‘Yeah, what are you doing in my chair?’”

Lonnie laughed so hard, rolling his head from side to side with his mouth hanging open, that no sound came out. After a while he began slapping Henry on the leg; I suppose just because the Bear had both of his and because he was also Cheyenne. “Um hmm, yes, it is so.”

Herbert, who had recovered from laughing at his own joke, lit his cigar, rapped the table, and signed off with his signature slogan—“Stay calm, have courage . . .”

The entire booth responded with the rest: “And wait for signs.”

Henry, probably glad for the interruption, put his own cold coffee on the table, smiled indulgently, and watched the disc jockey stroll away. It really wasn’t the Bear’s fault that our site had been suddenly appropriated at the last minute; as he’d explained to me, clearing all the events of all the organizations on the reservation was akin to herding prairie chickens.

I stared down at the platinum ring with the smallish diamond that was between two inset chips. “What’s the librarian’s name, Lonnie?”

At the mention of our collective obstruction, the laughter died away in his throat. “Oh, it’s my sister Arbutis. Umm hmm, yes, it is so.”

Henry raised a hand and massaged the bridge of his nose with a powerful

thumb and forefinger. “Ahh-he’, I had forgotten.”

I knew Arbutis Little Bird—more as Lonnie’s daughter’s aunt than as his sister. Melissa, with whom I’d been involved in a complicated case a couple of years ago, was now away in Bozeman playing point guard for Montana State. The news couldn’t have been worse for our cause—Arbutis was a steely-eyed, iron-bottomed gunboat of a woman whose natural response to everything was an absolute negative that brooked no discussion.

I looked back out the window where the crows had disappeared and the rain appeared to be winning the battle. We were doomed.

“Henry, have you thought about taking him down to Painted Warrior? That’s a pretty fine spot, um hmm, um hmm. There are crows all over the bottom land, and they circle the cliffs up where the warrior’s war paint streaks the rocks. Yes, it is so.”

The Bear released his nose. “Near Red Birney?”

They both smiled, and Lonnie nodded. “Yeah, definitely not White Birney.”

In a perverseness of geography, there were two towns by the name of Birney just on and just off the Rez. To the Indians they will forever be referred to as Red Birney and White Birney, but to the politically correct Caucasians the names had been transmogrified to Birney Day (for the day school), and Birney Post (for the post office). Like most things on the Rez, it was complicated.

“You can take the ridge road, but you’ll need a four-wheel-drive if it really decides to rain. If I was you, I’d take 4 down to the windmill at Tie Creek, and then go up the dirt track till you get to the spotter road to your right—that’ll take you straight over to the base of the cliffs.”

A spotter road was the name the locals called roads used to spotlight and poach deer on the Rez. I was already losing faith. “Lonnie, Cady’s really got her heart set on Crazy Head Springs, and the wedding is in two weeks.”

He nodded again and then became somber in respect for the gravity of my situation. “Well then, maybe you should go on over to the library, but take your gun, Walter. Umm hmm, yes, it is so.”

Vic stopped at the counter to buy some chewing gum and was having a conversation with Brandon White Buffalo—probably something to do with Katrina Walks Nice.

Henry was rolling Lonnie out the door and into the stunningly mixed-up summer afternoon, the ozone hanging in the air like baskets. The Cheyenne Nation, thinking it might be wise to explore other avenues, looked back at me. “Would you like to go take a look at Painted Warrior?”

I made a face, thinking about how I was going to break the news to Cady. “Well, I really don’t want to go over to the library and tangle with Arbutis Little Bird, I can tell you that much.”

“It is possible I can do that later. Do you have your gun? I may have to borrow it.”

I slapped the small of my back, where my duty sidearm rested simply from

habit. "All I've got is my .45, and I don't think that'd bring down Arbutis." I pushed open the door and started toward Henry's truck, which I truly despised. I'd loaned the Bullet to Vic so that she could go ahead to Billings, where she would be taking a flight to Omaha later that day for a training seminar on police public relations. That left me with Lonnie, Henry, and Rezdawg, the most pernicious vehicle on the North American continent.

Vic made her way past, reading my mind. "You're sure you don't need your truck?"

"I'll be fine."

She placed a fist on her belt and stood there, hipshot.

"I'm still trying to figure out why it is you volunteered to go to Omaha."

"Somebody's gotta do it."

"Yep, but Saizarbitoria could've gone—Frymire or Double-Tough."

She shrugged and turned her head.

"This doesn't have anything to do with the upcoming nuptials, does it?"

She stubbed the toe of a ballistic boot on the asphalt of the parking lot. "Mom's going to be here the day after tomorrow." She looked to the distance, at nothing particular. "I'm not good at this shit. I'll be back right before the wedding, but I think I'll just avoid the run-up to the three-ring circus—if you don't mind." She hit the button on my remote, and the lights blipped on my truck.

"Okay, but I assume you're not taking Dog."

She responded by opening the door, and we watched as more than a hundred and fifty pounds of assorted canine lineage vaulted from the front seat and circled around to the '63 three-quarter-ton beast, first going to Lonnie. The Northern Cheyenne chief reached his wrinkled hands out the door and around Dog's head, running a thumb over the bullet furrow and holding him as if giving a blessing. "Ha-ay, big rascal."

I went around the back and lowered Rezdawg's tailgate, pinching my fingers in the chains in the process. I waited till Dog noticed me and came around. He looked at the derelict truck and promptly sat.

"Vic needs the Bullet. Come on, we both get to suffer."

He jumped in the bed and I closed the tailgate twice because, of course, the first time it didn't line up.

Vic rolled down the driver's-side window of my truck. "You're going to be all right up here playing cowboy with the Indians?"

I joined her at the door. "I think so." We both watched as Henry put Lonnie's blanket over his lap, folded up the chief's wheelchair, and placed it in the bed with Dog. "I've got a good scout."

"Uh huh." She hit the ignition and fired up the V-10 and then sat there, rumbling. "I'll call you from Nebraska." She thought about it and pulled the three-quarter-ton down into gear. "Fuck it, what else is there to do?"

It was only a mile up the road to Lonnie's place, which was good because that was about the distance that Rezdawg could make without breaking down.

In the numerous conversations I'd had with Henry concerning his pickup, I'd asked him why, as meticulous as he was with every other aspect of his life—his house, his business, his car—why it was that he didn't get his piece-of-crap truck really fixed. His answer, as we'd waited by the side of the road for another of Rezdawg's rest periods to pass, was that the truck was a holy relic of his life and that replacing parts would alter its spirit. I retorted that it seemed to me that the junk pile's spirit was in need of a little repair, but he'd ignored me like he always did.

I'd also pointed out that the thing didn't have its original gas, tires, or oil, but that hadn't gotten me anywhere, either.

* * *

I rolled the chief up the incline to his picture-perfect home. Lonnie had had some wilder days when he was younger and had played baseball and drunk on a professional level until losing his legs to diabetes. He was still under parole with a cadre of sisters, headed by the formidable Arbutis, and had to negotiate with his sisters for visitation rights whenever Melissa, the point guard, came home, but he complained that that was less and less.

"She has lots of friends up there in Bozeman. I can see why it is she'd rather stay there than come home and watch stories with me." The stories Lonnie referred to were the soap operas he watched religiously and reported on as if the characters were actual friends. "But it just makes me love her more when she does come home—um hmm, yes, it is so."

I paused on the porch so Lonnie could collect his mail from a box attached to the house; most residents on the Rez had post office boxes and didn't get this kind of attention to delivery, but Lonnie was special.

"They toy with our hearts, these daughters of ours—don't they, lawman?"

"Yes, they do."

He patted my hand in reassurance. "Don't worry; we'll get your daughter's wedding sorted out."

"Thanks, Lonnie."

I started to roll him into the house, but his hands fastened around the chrome runners of his wheelchair. "I think I will stay out here and watch the rain; maybe listen to some baseball. The Rockies are at home and playing the Phillies this afternoon."

I looked at the sky with its patchwork of sun and storm clouds—the devil must be beating his wife indeed. I bet I was the only one who used that phrase anymore.

I adjusted Lonnie's chair so that he could look northwest and watch the rain come in or not, whatever its choice. The laden clouds were reflected in Lonnie's

thick glasses and joined with the tiny rainbows that had a tendency to magically appear there, confirming the impression that Lonnie was a pot of gold.

“The devil must be beating his wife. Um hmm, yes, it is so.”

* * *

A damp Dog joined us on the bench seat as we headed back toward town, and I continued to spin the ring on my finger as I aired an elbow out the passenger-side window that only partially rolled down. “It’s not your fault.”

The Cheyenne Nation ignored me and stared out the cracked windshield.

“Look, whatever happens, she’ll forgive you—just not me.”

The Bear nodded and then moved on to one of our other myriad problems. “We have maxed out the Western 8 motel in Ashland.”

There were no other motels for about fifty miles.

He shifted gears, and I listened to them grind. “There is my home.”

“I don’t want you to have to do that.”

“It would be an honor.”

If you hung around with the Cheyenne long enough, you learned when not to argue with their generosity. “Thank you.” I stretched my hand across Dog’s broad head and scratched behind both ears, something he enjoyed as though it was a religious experience. “Strange weather.”

Henry didn’t say anything but glanced at the ring on my pinkie. I tried to change the subject. “Why do you suppose the old-timers used to say that the devil must be beating his wife?”

He spoke over the aged engine as he made third, breezed through the stop sign at the corner of one of Lame Deer’s few intersections, and headed south on Bureau of Indian Affairs Route 4, the rumble strips sounding like war drums underneath us. “It is a universal folkloric phrase.” He threw Rezdawg into fourth, and we toolled back through the main part of town past the White Buffalo Sinclair Station, the Big Store IGA, which Henry says stands for Indians Grab Anything, and the tribal government buildings. “The Italian version is the same as ours but the French one is *Le diable se marie avec sa fille*, or the devil becomes his daughter’s husband.”

I stopped petting Dog, threw my arm over the back seat, and looked out the rear window. “Perverts.”

“The German proverb is *Wenn’s regnet und die Sonne scheint, so schlägt der Teufel seine Großmutter: er lacht und sie weint*, which means that the devil is beating his grandmother: he laughs and she cries.”

A black Yukon with a heavy grille guard and Montana plates had started following us in town and was a little close to Rezdawg’s back bumper, at which point I noticed that there was an understated halogen emergency light flashing red on the dash.

“There are similar phrases in Hungary and Holland.”

“Have you been hanging around Jules Beldon?” The emergency lights in the vehicle behind us were definitely signaling us to pull over. “Hey, Henry?”

Unaware that some sort of official vehicle was dogging us, or more likely ignoring the summons, he continued to navigate our way out of town. “The Polish say that when the sun is shining and the rain is raining that the devil is making butter.”

I fully turned in the seat to get a better look. “Henry . . .”

The GMC made an aggressive move and started to pull up beside us; the Yukon’s engine surged, and the Bear finally noticed it.

“The Russians call it a blind rain; somewhat depressing but still poetic.” He waited a moment for the SUV to go around and when it didn’t, he pulled Rezdawg over to the gravel between the reflector posts at the side of the road. “Either way, the devil gets the blame for everything.”

I watched as the Yukon, in direct violation of standard police procedure, pulled slanted in front of us as if we might make a run for it, which, considering it was Rezdawg, made the situation that much funnier. There were no markings on the vehicle, and I watched as the driver’s-side door was jerked open and a very tall, athletic-looking woman with dark hair got out.

Resting a hand on the roof of the GMC, she concentrated her Oakley reflective sunglasses on us. She stood there for a second, then slammed the door and, ignoring the few cars that swerved to avoid her, started around the rear of her vehicle. She had high, wide cheekbones and a strong jaw that balanced the features framed in the blue-black hair that was braided to her elbows. Late twenties, she was wearing black jeans, a Tribal Police uniform shirt, black ropers, and a matching gun belt with a very large caliber Smith & Wesson N-Frame revolver banging against her hip.

She looked like one of those ultimate warriors who can step out on the sidewalk and run a marathon at the drop of a war bonnet.

“License and registration.”

Henry didn’t move, just continued to look at her. I didn’t blame him.

She made the statement again, this time with a little more force, separating the words as she spoke. “License. And. Registration.”

Henry glanced at me and then pulled the naked, cardboard sun visor down, the vinyl covering having disintegrated and shed like snakeskin long ago. The registration and insurance card fluttered onto his lap like a shot bird. He leaned up on one side and pulled his wallet from his back pocket and removed his license, adding it to the collection he handed her. “What is the problem, Officer?”

She studied the collection of documents and then gestured toward the black Yukon. “Do you see that vehicle?”

Henry made a production of lowering his Wayfarers and placing the flat palm of his hand above his eyes like some B-movie Indian spotting a wagon train. “Yes, I think I do.”

The next statement had even more heat in it. “That is an *official vehicle*, and

when it indicates for you to pull over—you pull over.” She glanced down at the license and studied it for a moment. “I know you, Mr. Henry Standing Bear.”

He studied her in an indifferent manner. “And I have heard of you, Ms. Lolo Long.”

I noticed that this time when he called her by name, he did not proffer the title of officer.

Her chin came out as she locked eyes with him—something not too many people would or could do. “And what have you heard?”

“I have heard that you are the tightest . . .”

I interrupted, sensing that what the Cheyenne Nation was about to say wasn’t likely to help our situation. “Why didn’t you hit your siren?”

A long moment passed as she shifted her gaze from Henry, past Dog, to me. She lowered her own sunglasses to get a better look into the gloom of the cab, and her jasper-colored eyes leveled on me like the twin-bore of a battleship turret. “Excuse me, but was I speaking to you?”

I shrugged a shoulder and smiled inwardly at her resemblance to Vic. “Well, I guess it’s none of my business, but there are no markings on that vehicle and this thing sits awfully high and as close as you were I had to really look to see your emergency lights—if you’d have just hit your . . .”

She threw an arm up on the door sill and interrupted me. “You know, Mister . . . ?” She left the statement hanging there like her arm.

“Longmire.”

She shook her head ever so slightly, as if my name was an annoyance in itself. “That first part, the one about this not being any of your business?” She pointed a no-nonsense fingernail in the air, as if pinning my words, like bugs in a collection. “I liked that; let’s stick with that one.” The iridescent glasses came back up, and she turned to face Henry. “I know a lot of people around here consider you to be something kind of special, but that doesn’t exclude you from the rules of the road.” She raised a hand, gesturing back toward town. “That sign back there at the intersection says stop, not pause, not hesitate—stop is what it says, and whenever I’m around you better damn well stop.”

I watched as she took his cards and disappeared back toward the Yukon, her wrist-thick braid held fast by a beaded barrette bobbing in counterpoint to her strut and the slap of the revolver.

The Bear looked bored and supported his chin with a fist and placed an elbow out the window. “So, when did you start wearing a pinkie ring?”

I stopped twirling it. “It belonged to my great-grandmother.”

“The witch?”

I sighed at the Bear’s knowledge of my family history. “She wasn’t a witch; she was just one of those herb doctors.” He nodded, but I could tell he didn’t agree. “Martha wore it but gave it back to me to give it to Cady when she got married. The problem is that Michael already got her an engagement ring so I don’t know what to do with it.”

He mumbled into his fist. “Give it to her.”

“People are weird about that kind of thing sometimes.”

“Just give it to her.” He reached out and smoothed a piece of duct tape that held the instrument panel to the dash. “Is that why you are wearing it, to remind you?”

“Kind of. I lost it a while back and then discovered it in a little cedar box I’ve got on my dresser. I thought maybe if I kept it on my finger I wouldn’t lose it again.”

The Bear didn’t say anything but looked back at the Yukon. I could still see the adhesive where the sticker price had been on the inside of the window—and ventured a question. “Who’s Ms. Lolo Long?”

“The new tribal police chief, an appointment from the last tribal chief.”

I nodded. “The indicted one.”

“Yes—the one whom Lonnie replaced.” He pursed his lips and pointed them toward the Yukon, where it looked as if Officer Long was in the act of writing a lengthy ticket. “Iraqi war vet; I do not know what she did over there, but she came back wired tight like a Montana-made mandolin. I guess the old chief was trying to make up for his tenure and thought he was doing everybody a favor by installing a by-the-book police chief, but so far as I can tell, all she has done is made the lives of everyone miserable.”

I watched as she opened the door and approached, the hi-tech sunglasses now secured in her breast pocket. “Including yours?”

He smiled the close-lipped smile. “Lately.”

Officer Long stopped at the door and handed Henry his papers along with an aluminum clipboard and pen. “I’ve cited you for failure to stop at the intersection, failure to respond to an official vehicle, and the fact that you have no brake lights.” She glanced down the dented, mottled-green length of Rezdawg and then back to the Bear. “I’m sure I could find plenty of other violations attached to this particular vehicle, but seeing as how this is our first official meeting, I thought I’d take it easy on you.”

The Cheyenne Nation looked at me, but I didn’t say anything and continued to pet Dog. The beast looked at Lolo Long with expectation, all smiles and wagging tail.

Traitor.

“You have thirty days to respond in the mail or in person at the law enforcement and detention center—you know where that is?”

“You mean the jail?” Henry smiled. “I do.”

“I bet you do.”

Henry signed the ticket and handed it back to her.

“Do you understand the violations as they have been explained to you?”

“Yes.”

She pulled the space-age sunglasses from her pocket and dramatically placed them over the opaque chalcedony eyes, ripped his copy of the ticket from the

clipboard, and handed it to him. "Have a nice day."

He continued to smile, pushed his old-school Ray-Bans over his eyes again in response, and handed me the \$262 ticket as she started to turn and go. "Here, file this in the glove box—under chicken shit."

She paused for only an instant and slightly turned her head.

I watched as she took a breath and tasted in her mouth the words she wanted to say. I half expected her to draw the big .44, but instead she hitched her thumbs in her gun belt, held that last look, and then walked off, punishing the roadway with the heels of her boots.

It was the most professional thing she'd done during the entire interaction.

She started the SUV, did a tire-smoking reentrance to BIA 4, and continued south with a full head of steam.

Henry yawned, placed his license back in his wallet, and flipped it onto the dash. "I do not think that I ever have had brake lights."

* * *

The lower ridge that leads to Painted Warrior cliff runs for about a mile north and west from Red Birney, and the only way to the site is from along the ridge or back up through the dirt roads below. I doubted that Cady and Michael would want to be married on a cliff, but Henry assured me that the area at the base was as picturesque as it was dramatic.

He was right.

We'd followed Lonnie's instructions and eased Rezdawg off the road between the grass-covered hills that ringed the base of the cliffs and a large sedimentary rock cairn. We climbed steadily until we reached a saddle and a scattering of large boulders and parked at the top of a small ridge, just as wisps of steam were floating out from under Rezdawg's hood.

There was a thick-bodied mule deer a little off to our right, heading down toward Tie Creek, and I allowed her a substantial lead before opening the door and letting Dog out to patrol the area. He immediately went to where the doe had been standing and watched impatiently as she bounded through the scrub pine and clamored over the rocks toward the base of the cliffs.

"You never would've caught her anyhow."

He turned to look at me as I closed the door and joined Henry, who was leaning on the homemade, Day-Glo orange grille guard and partial steam bath at the front of the truck. "What do you think?"

It was just the way Lonnie had described it. I had heard of the site and might've even been here when I was a kid, but I guess I'd never really seen it. Framed by a box canyon below, the Painted Warrior raised his face from the ridge and looked toward the sky. As with cloud images, you had to look at the thing for a while before you saw it, but he was there. The features reminded me of another friend, Virgil White Buffalo, all the way down to the deep furrows that indented

the rock visage's face. The majority was a khaki-colored stone, but there were a few massive streaks of war paint, the rocks stained by the deposits of scoria that ran vertically down the giant's face—hence the name, Painted Warrior.

It was a straight-up climb of about two hundred feet to the base of the ridge where the sheer cliff began.

The Bear tripped the latch, lifted Rezdawg's hood, and watched as a ghostly cloud of steam trailed away in the breeze. I wondered if it too would turn into something recognizable. Henry was gently working the radiator cap off with a red shop rag he'd retrieved from the cab. "When I was young, we used to hunt deer here; just run them up through the canyon and have somebody waiting at the ridge."

I looked around at the surrounding saddle studded with Krummholz pines, stunted by the altitude and atmospheric conditions. If you didn't know any better, you wouldn't think that the diminutive trees were actually hundreds of years old. Reflecting the sun that peeked through the assembled thunderheads were small outcroppings of rocks that surrounded the ridge like a wreath. "Is this the spot Lonnie was thinking of?"

"Here, or possibly just past the creek." He finally loosened the cap enough for a gurgling release and antifreeze dribbled down the radiator.

I glanced back at the panoramic display. "Where the opening in the rock walls leads toward the cliff?"

He rested the cap on the inner fender and turned to look along with me. "Yes." He glanced back at the steam continuing to roil from Rezdawg. "Would you like to hike over there and see it?"

"I guess I'd better. I just wish I'd brought a camera so that I could send Cady pictures."

"I have one in the truck." He wiped his hands on the rag, which he returned to the cab, and came back with a medium-sized bag with a strap that he threw over his shoulder. "I also have two bottles of water. I am prepared."

* * *

Tie Creek was at the base of the ridge, but it was summer and the water was only ankle deep. We forded the stream by walking on the rounded stones—Dog just splashed through—and continued among the trees to the next hill. There was a clearer view of the lower cliffs reflecting the bright sunlight that cascaded down in beams like some biblical illustration, the cliffs surrounding the bottom of the more impressive rocks above, and I had to admit that the whole area was pretty breathtaking.

I stopped at the top of the hill to catch my breath and stared up at something that had reflected near the top of Painted Warrior. I stood there and took in a few lungfuls, wondering what it was I thought I'd seen. I'd had quite the adventure in the Cloud Peak Wilderness Area only two months earlier, and the effects were

still lingering. The Cheyenne Nation was watching me.

“Thought I saw something up there.”

He turned and looked. “Where?”

“Near the top; something flashed.”

His keen eyes played across the uppermost ridge. “I do not see anything.”

I nodded. “Probably just a reflection off some quartz or an old beer can.

Speaking of, can we get a beer after this?”

His eyes scanned the ridge. “Sure.” He checked his wristwatch. “We can go up to the Jimtown Bar and get a drink before the professionals show up. We might not even get into a fight.”

“In the meantime, can I have one of those bottles of water?”

He slung the bag from his shoulder, unzipped one of the compartments, and handed me a bottle, the condensation slick on the outside.

I sipped my water, slipped my hat off of my head, and wiped the sweat from inside the band. “Is that professional courtesy, when you visit somebody else’s bar?”

He nodded and then squatted down and began pulling a large camera body and lens from the bag. “You bet.” Having assembled the camera, he popped off the cap and pointed the lens toward me.

I held my hat up to block the shot. “Just the surroundings, please—not the inhabitants.” Dog sat beside me and looked at Henry. “Take a picture of him; he doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Your daughter would like a photo of you, I’m sure, and since we are in the position of negotiating our way out of disaster . . .”

I put my hat back on my head. “All right, but then you have to let me take one of you for her.”

He raised the camera and directed it toward me. “I am like Dog—I do not mind; I am photogenic.”

When I laughed, he took the picture.

I held my hand out for the camera, and he gave it to me without argument. I turned it around and looked at the multitude of dials and buttons. “I’m used to the IPH cameras. . . .” I looked up at him. “You know, Idiot Push Here.”

He took it and set the focus on automatic, then handed it back to me. “There, just push the big button on the top.”

I raised the expensive device and looked through the viewer. “Thanks.”

The Painted Warrior background made for an interesting effect, with one native face mirroring the other. I watched with my one eye as the autofocus first defined the features of the Cheyenne Nation and then the sandstone cliffs behind him, searching for whatever my wandering hand chose to photograph.

He repeated patiently through his close-lipped smile, “The large button on the top.”

“Okay.” I readjusted my aim, but the automatic function on the camera continued to focus on the cliffs just over the Bear’s shoulder—almost as if the

Painted Warrior was demanding a photograph of itself. “Damn.”

It was right as I went ahead and pushed the button that I could see something scrambling at the top, above the giant Indian’s forehead, and then plummet from the face.

I yanked the camera down just as a high-pitched wail carried through the canyon walls, and someone fell in an awkward position, almost as if holding something. Henry turned quickly and we watched, helpless.

The body struck a cornice once on the way down, then splayed from the side of the cliff and landed at the bottom where the grass-covered slope rose to meet the rocks. The liquid thump of the body striking the ground was horrific, and we continued to watch as whoever it was rolled down the hillside with a cascading jumble of scree and tumbling rock.

We were both running, the Cheyenne Nation ahead of me and moving at an astounding pace. Dog followed as we thundered down the hillside between the rock walls and back up the other side.

It was so surreal that I couldn’t believe it had actually happened, but the adrenaline dumping high octane into my bloodstream and the Bear’s reaction told me that it must’ve been true.

By the time I got to the last hill leading to the base of the cliffs, I could see Henry looking from side to side, trying to find where the person that had fallen might be. There was a copse of juniper to the left, and I watched as he started and then ran toward it. I was there in an instant, and what I saw was like some surrealistic painting. I felt as if the world had been pulled out from under me, too.

Her right leg was contorted to the extreme with her foot up above her shoulder, and there were deep lacerations on one side of her body. The eyes were unfocused as she stared at the rocks above, and her head lunged involuntarily, the brain attempting to send signals through the broken spine.

Henry kneeled beside her and cupped the side of her head in his hands, attempting to provide some kind of support without adjusting her. “Do not move.”

A breath escaped her lips as a fresh flow of tears drained down her cheeks. She gulped air into her bleeding mouth three times, then turned her head toward the Bear’s hand—and died.

I kneeled beside him and looked at her, reached up to her throat, and placed my fingers where her pulse had been. “Do you know her?”

He lowered her head and brushed back his hair with bloody fingers, the smears trailing from the corner of his eye to the clamped jaw like macabre Kabuki makeup. “No.”

Dog began barking behind us, and I yelled at him, “Shut up!”

Henry and I must’ve had the same thought at precisely the same time, because we both looked up simultaneously. From this angle, we couldn’t see anything at the top of the cliff—only a few pebbles that rained down on us that must’ve become dislodged during her fall.

I went ahead and yelled, “Hey, is there anybody up there?” My voice echoed

off the rocks above and below, along with Dog's incessant barking. "Shut up!"

I threw my head back and yelled louder this time. "Hey, is there anybody up there?" I took a deep breath and shouted again, "We've got a woman who's fallen!"

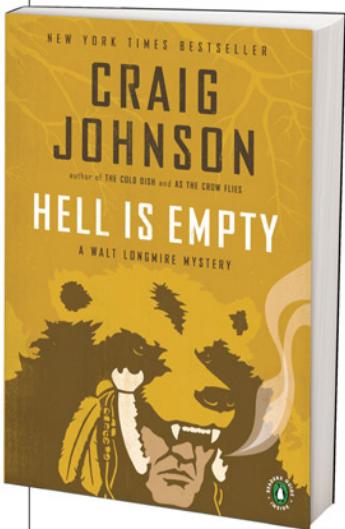
Nothing, just Dog's continued barking.

I turned and saw him standing down the hillside. "I said, shut up!"

The big beast's head rose and cocked in a quizzical cant. After a moment, the huge muzzle dipped and nosed at something—and it was only when he gently pawed at the blanketed bundle in front of him in the high stalks of buffalo grass that I finally saw the tiny hand and heard a baby cry.

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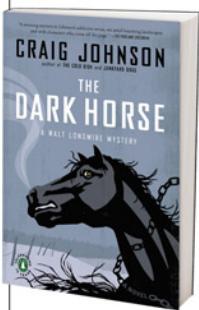


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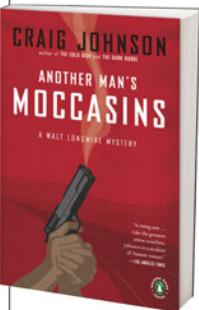


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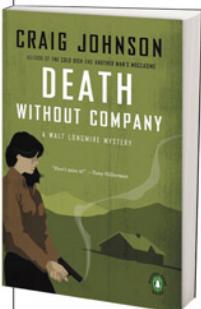


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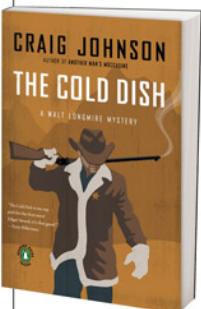


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